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AUTHOR Ingle, Judith K.
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ABSTRACT

Since 1984, the Language Arts Lab at Irmo High School (Columbia, South Carolina) has provided: (1) remediation in reading and writing to students with low standardized test scores; and (2) assistance to other students in the areas of study skills, college entrance exam preparation, term papers, reading and reading assignments, grammar, and vocabulary development. The lab offers no credits or grades and is open to all students. Twice a month, Director Judith Ingle visits each remedial and level one class to teach basic reading skills, serving as an instructional model for the English teacher and encouraging the students to utilize the lab. Other students are lured to the lab through advertising and word of mouth. Most students come to the lab during lunch periods; some come in lieu of a study hall. The lab provides tutoring on a one-on-one basis, emphasizing teacher/student dialogue, and supplementary staff members assist when the traffic is heavy. Managing the lab requires a strict documentation system, including sign-in sheets and work-progress data. The Language Arts Lab houses an abundance of reading materials and software, as well as five computers, all of which serve the teachers as well as the students. (JD)

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Irmo High School's Language Arts Lab: A Golden Opportunity

Judith K. Ingle

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Irmo High School's Language Arts Lab: A Golden Opportunity

The implementation of the Language Arts Lab at Irmo High School was the culmination of a personal and professional dream which began almost ten years ago. The dream grew from an idea which had worked its way into a paper written for a reading course I was taking at the University of South Carolina towards my master's in reading in the mid-1970's. The paper focused on the initiation and implementation of a reading lab at Irmo, something I was convinced not only was needed but would work; while the principal liked the idea, he wasn't convinced enough of the need to make a commitment. Then several years later the lack of basic skills among students in South Carolina emerged as an educational issue, and suddenly the emphasis in curriculum shifted toward reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. I knew the time was right, so I dusted off the plan, revised, rewrote and resubmitted; it was a hit! "Just what we need," the same-principal-from-ten-years-ago said; and we were off and running.

The Language Arts Lab has been in operation since February, 1984. Even though it was mid-year, the principal and I were able to convince the Board of Trustees in Lexington District Five to hire a part-time teacher to take two of my classes (I was teaching remedial reading and a college-preparatory reading/study skills course at the time) so I could open the lab during the lunch periods when students would have the opportunity to utilize the facilities, which, at the time, consisted of me (and some materials)! But then we really got lucky. In August, 1984, the Education Improvement Act was signed into law, one part of which mandated remediation; and schools all over the

state were scurrying around trying to determine the best way to provide the opportunity for remediation. There we were at Irmo, feeling good that, if nothing else, we had a system in place for serving these students.

My dream for a reading lab has always encompassed a great deal more than just a center for remediation; in fact, I was determined that it would not become known as the place where only the "dumb" kids came to learn to read. From the very beginning, the model, as I will describe it in this article, was one that could and would serve all students at Irmo High School. Even though we have made minor adjustments in the two and a half years we have been opened, the basic philosophy and objectives remain constant because what we are doing is meeting the needs of a diverse body of students.

The lab serves two groups of students. The primary purpose of the lab is to provide remediation in reading and writing to those students whose CTBS or BSAP scores fall below the 25th percentile. The secondary function of the lab is to provide a place where students can walk in for help in a variety of areas: study skills, PSAT/SAT preparation, term papers, other writing assignments, reading assignments, grammar, and vocabulary development. The Education Improvement Act now mandates that those students needing remediation must be served in light of the exit exam requirement for graduation; the other students (and of course very often those students who come for remediation return for help in other areas) are lured to the lab through advertising and word-of-mouth from both students and teachers. One significant aspect of the lab is that it offers no credit or grades, and my more skeptical and sometimes cynical colleagues warned me that students would not come, especially

if no grades were involved. I am most pleased to have proven them wrong; the students did come and are still coming. All of us, teachers, students, and parents, are aware of the better grades and the improved self-confidence among these students. My undergraduate degree in English and the years I spent teaching English serve me well when students come on a short-term basis for help with a particular unit of grammar or a specific writing assignment. Others may come every day to work on SAT preparatory material or for review of grammar rules; I never know what questions or problems might walk through the door. I had to refamiliarize myself with Julius Caesar last year when the tenth graders were studying it in English; so far this year I am working with several students who are having difficulty preparing for and doing well on tests in biology. The concerns brought to me are as varied as the students themselves, and I find myself playing catch-up by taking the books home to read and study before meeting with the student the next day.

We serve all students in a variety of ways. This year in working with the remedial students we are continuing something we began last year. Twice a month I visit each remedial English and level 1 English class to teach the basic reading skills (decoding and word meaning, main idea, details, inference, reference usage, and analysis of literature). The majority of the students I have to serve are enrolled in these classes so my visitations not only guarantee that we are serving the students but also serve as a instructional model for the English teacher. Part of the concern among English teachers about the required integration of basic skills instruction into the curriculum was that they did not feel comfortable teaching reading skills. Between my visits, the classroom teacher reinforces the skill

by providing practice opportunities, and the students are encouraged to utilize the lab on a regular basis. For those students who are enrolled in other levels of English and who must also be served for remediation, we are going to try using a contract this year so students will obligate themselves to come to the lab on a regular basis. Another motivation for these students coming to the lab will be that the work they complete in the lab will be graded and the grade will be passed on to the English teacher; this will help the student feel as if the work he/she is doing is making a difference.

Even though the lab is opened seven periods a day, the largest number of students come during the three lunch periods. All sophomores spend half of their lunch periods in study hall so this is an excellent opportunity for them to utilize the lab; juniors and seniors may come during their lunch periods or during a regular, full-period study hall if they are enrolled in one (because most students are enrolled in six classes, we don't have many who are in study halls). I have an aide and another teacher who help during the lunch periods; this is particularly necessary when I am scheduled to teach in one of the English classes during the lunch periods so someone will be in the lab to oversee the students.

Our management and documentation system is essential in having a smoothly run lab. Students who come from either lunch/study hall or a regular study hall sign in; we inform the study hall teacher that the students are with us so there won't be any questions about the whereabouts of the students. Each student, both remedial and walk-in, has a folder which contains an information sheet stapled in the front and a work record sheet which is kept in the folder. Also, any worksheets, completed or to be completed, and answer sheets are

kept in the folder. This year for the first time I have devised checklists of materials so we can check off the work that the student has completed. This documentation is an absolute must for the remedial student and will become even more essential once the exit exam determines whether or not a student receives a diploma. The walk-in students usually just have to record what work they did on the work record sheet.

The Language Arts Lab is blessed with an abundance of reading materials and software. Over the years the remedial reading program (we offer a course called remedial reading for elective credit) has continually added to its inventory of reading materials, both skill oriented and recreational books, so that we would have several options when teaching a particular skill or unit. Because I taught the remedial reading course for a number of years, I ordered most of the material and am now using some of it in the lab. We have enough so that students who take remedial reading and also come to the lab need not duplicate materials. Yes, we do have computers, five of them, and yes, I would like to have more, primarily for the walk-in students who need and want drill and practice on SAT preparation and grammar. I do have an excellent collection of software bought with the remedial student in mind in that a lot of it is skill oriented but in game format; but I have a strong prejudice against using the computer for initial instruction or as the total program. I am a reading teacher, and I am committed to books and to the student's interaction with the written word and with the feel of a book in his/her hands; therefore, computers are used as a supplementary means of reinforcing and practicing, sometimes in a drill and practice format, sometimes in a game format, the skills and lessons previously taught. I will be happy

to send lists of materials and software to anyone who requests them.

The teaching methods used in the lab are different from typical teaching methods only in that we are able to provide more one-on-one contact with the students; however, it is this type of contact which we feel has provided the most worthwhile benefits. The remedial students who come to us are very often the most severly disabled readers who have experienced one failure after another because they cannot read. We make no promises that we can dramatically increase these students' reading levels; we all know that at the secondary level, the progress is slow. But we have seen students who were in level one English classes, were enrolled in remedial reading as an elective, and were served by the Language Arts Lab increase their Gates-Maginite posttest reading scores by a year or more. As exciting as this may be for us and for the student, we must keep reminding ourselves that we may be looking at a reading scores that went from 3.5 to 4.7; but this is a beginning.

The method we try to use predominantly is one of verbal exchange or dialogue between the student and the teacher. Whether the student reads aloud or silently, he/she knows that that dialogue is envitable. Even if we ask the student to respond in some written way, either by answering questions or writing about what he/she has read, the student can expect to have to justify why he/she answered a question a particular way even if he/she answered the question correctly! We all know that often a student's "correct" answer is just a lucky guess, and it is very difficult for a student to fake knowing an answer when he/she is sitting there eyeball to eyeball with the teacher who is waiting for an answer. The student must be made to defend his/her answer through verbal exchange with the teacher and

sometimes with peers, although with these remedial students, we must be very careful not to put that student in a potentially embarrassing situation. I believe that a lab that relies primarily on students attending, working on worksheets, having these worksheets graded, and moving on to other worksheets is doomed to failure.

In addition to the lab's being a place where students may come for assistance, it also serves as a resource center for reading materials. Teachers frequently come to see what materials I have for teaching or reinforcing a particular reading skill. In the past teachers other than English teachers have used me as a resource to teach their students a lesson on how to take notes; the importance of teaching study skills has long been a pet interest of mine and one which I reinforce in the lab when students come to me because they are having difficulty in a particular subject such as history or science.

The premise of the Language Arts Lab at Irmo High School is that it can be all things to all students; the potential is limitless. We provide what the students or teachers request, and we make every attempt to meet the short-term or long-term needs of the students. Is what we are doing working? We think so, but more important, the students think so.

I first met Tony two years ago in the tenth grade; his name appeared on my list of those students needing remediation. He was enrolled in a level one English class and in remedial reading. At the time, Tony was reading on about the fourth grade level. Although he had a gleam in his eyes that communicated potential mischieviousness, for the most part he was well-behaved and a little on the shy side. While he never exhibited any hostility, he did exhibit impatience and frustration when he couldn't complete the learning tasks quickly or

successfully. At some point during the school year, Tony decided that the books we were making available to him to read were books that he was not only able to read but also that he wanted to read. This was quite a revelation to Tony, and like a fire that is out of control, Tony began reading, book after book after book. He worked his way through the high-interest, low-level paperbacks we had accumulated over the year; and sometime in May, he announced to me that he had decided to "read his way through high school!" One of the most heartening spin-offs for Tony was that the next year, Tony's junior year, I saw a tremendous difference in the way he approached other subjects in school; he had so much more self-confidence that he was able to tackle U.S. History in a methodical, serious manner. This is Tony's senior year, and I am pleased to announce that he even seems a little cocky about all these newly acquired skills; he chose to take remedial reading again as an elective credit, but his attitude this time is more of a self-assured, "I don't need this stuff now." Maybe we have done our jobs too well!

There are many more success stories like Tony's; many of them center around the students who come for help on a walk-in basis and who come back to tell me how well they did on the grammar test, the writing assignment, or the literature test. But it is the Tony's who light a fire under me to work harder and find ways to challenge them more. I have an unwavering belief that these students who have been labeled remedial, who show up on lists of students below standard year after year, can perform at much higher levels and have much more ability than they have ever been given credit for. So much of their potential has never been tapped, and they have grown lazy, as have we sometimes. Teaching these students isn't easy; there is often as much

physical energy expended as there is emotional and mental. Tugging, forcing, badgering, pleading, teasing, being painfully honest about their chances in this cold, cruel world of ours all require stamina and commitment. We do it all in the Language Arts Lab, and we believe that what we are doing is making a difference for our students.